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ABSTRACT

The ability to communicate the imagery of a literary selection is difficult for beginning students in undergraduate oral interpretation classes. Awareness of indirect sensory images must begin with direct awareness of self. The sensory self-description of how one looks, sounds, smells, tastes, feels, and moves is a means of stimulating self-awareness and literary sensitivity. Whether it is used along or in conjunction with other teaching methods, the strength of this instructional strategy is its starting point--an imagery description of the self in words and actions that emanate from the self. Once students experience these self-induced verbal stimuli, they have more concrete ideas of how to communicate imagery in the performance of literature. (Procedures for using self-descriptions in the classroom and examples of student self-descriptions are included.) (RL)

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AN IMAGERY EXERCISE IN

SELF-AWARENESS AND LITERARY SENSITIVITY

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Abstract: The ability to actualize the imagery of a literary selection is a difficult goal for beginning students on the undergraduate level to accomplish. Awareness of indirect sensory images must begin with direct awareness of self. A sensory self-description of how one looks, sounds, smells, tastes, feels, and moves is a means of stimulating literary sensitivity. This essay discusses the significance of self-awareness to imagery, describes the exercise, and suggests its practical implications for the interpreter.

(A version of this paper was presented to the Central States Speech Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 12, 1980.)

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An Imagery Exercise In
Self-Awareness and Literary Sensitivity

Imagery is one of the most common and at the same time most difficult literary devices for the beginning student of oral interpretation to actualize in performance. Understanding imagery as word associations that stimulate one or more of the senses presents little problem. Recognizing the types and combinations of imagery in literature--visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and kinesthetic--is a relatively simple task.[1] But attempting to respond to the imagery in order to convey the meaning and vitality of the selection is a real challenge for most interpreters. In theory the reader recreates the sensory impression of the words in his imagination from past recollections or secondhand associations of similar images; then, that experience is transformed into empathetic vocal and physical responses which communicate the image(s) to the listener; the symbols and sounds transmitted by the reader are recreated in the mind of the listener from his experience; finally, the audience response serves as feedback for the interpreter. In practice this process is not as automatic as it appears. "Oral communication does not 'just come naturally.' It is a learned behavior involving variables that interact."[2] The communication of imagery to an audience requires the interaction of the body of the reader and the body of the literature. In other words, the interpreter must communicate the material on both the cognitive and

affective dimensions. This implies a knowledge of self as well as a knowledge of the literature on these same dimensions.

Therefore, this paper suggests that self-awareness is the key to triggering literary sensitivity in the performance of oral interpretation. The discussion details the significance of self-awareness to imagery and provides an instructional strategy which demonstrates what Wallace Bacon calls the "tensive relationship between the aliveness of the text and his own [the interpreter's] aliveness."[3]

Imagery and Self-Awareness

The oral interpretation of imagery in literature depends on the ability to recall sensation(s) as well as the ability to experience the sensation(s) naturally; that is, to become totally and freely involved in the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the literature. Although the principle is quite natural, the process is not. It is easier to recreate a mental picture of someone "wondering lonely as a cloud" (however ludicrous that may seem to the contemporary undergraduate), than it is to transform that sensory experience vocally and physically to an audience.[4] But the idea of suggesting emotion in public is just as inhibiting as the intellectual variables of the process. The interpreter's stimulus is a group of words which are substitutes for live behavior and symbols unique to the author's style of speech behavior. Everything about the situation and the message is strange.

Taking the latter constraints into consideration, one might ask: "Is it realistic to expect a natural response from the beginning student?" The answer is a qualified yes. As Chester Long, author of the text The Liberal Art of Interpretation, comments, ". . . Even nature needs a little help when we are trying to adapt our own naturalness to something so highly intense and compressed as literature."[5] It is impossible to respond naturally to imagery in literature without some perception of that which makes the respondent most natural--the self. Thus, the "help" to which Long refers connotes self-awareness. Just as sensitivity to self is essential to effective communication, the same is true for successful oral interpretation. The importance of this concept is established by the interpersonal theorist William Schutz in Here Comes Everybody:

> Every thought, gesture, muscle tension, feeling, stomach gurgle, nose scratch, fart, hummed tune, slip of the tongue, illness--everything is significant and meaningful and related to the now. It is possible to know and understand oneself on all these levels, and the more one knows the more he is free to determine his own life.[6]

The interpretation theorist might add: "The more one knows about his senses the more he is free to respond naturally to imagery--the life of literature."

The idea of self-awareness as an imagery stimulus is not new. Most college texts concentrate on evoking sensory perception within the reader through pantomime, observation, detailed descriptions of objects or persons, associations of images with events, analysis of the author's language, and identification of one's bodily responses during recall of a particular sensation. These techniques are proven starting points for sensory receptivity; however, they lack a direct application of embodiment of self and embodiment of the written word. The student is able to pantomime slipping on ice, recall the sensation of touching a hot burner, or hold his nose as a jar of horseradish is opened; but the transfer of those experiences to indirect sensory images--the language of literature--is another matter completely. This instructor has found such exercises to be successful with the student who is uninhibited and creative at the outset--a rare individual in the undergraduate classroom.

The majority of beginning oral interpretation students are stiff, silent, and scared. They are generally a mixed group from eighteen to fifty-five years old who have little or no familiarity with literature. Such individuals require a more practical and explicit approach to the abstract notion of actualizing imagery. Experiencing indirect sensory images must begin with direct awareness of self. This process is facilitated when the student's awareness of self emanates from his own written words. One means of clarifying and demonstrating the relationship between imagery

and the reader is a sensory self-description.

The Imagery Exercise

Objectives

The assignment has five objectives: (1) to involve students in a relatively tension-free or natural performance exercise, (2) to develop an awareness of imagery, (3) to foster self-awareness, (4) to demonstrate the embodiment of the written word, and (5) to encourage creativity.

Procedure

A sensory self-description of how one looks, sounds, smells, tastes, feels, and moves is assigned early in the semester; preferably during the unit on imagery or performance considerations. This is a nongraded written assignment to be delivered before the class. No time limit is set for the performance, but a structure is suggested. Students should devote about two pages to this description, with at least a paragraph analysis of each sense.

Six criteria determine the success of this exercise. First, it is important to precede this assignment with a critical discussion and examples of the role of imagery in literature and in the performance of oral interpretation. Second, the rationale must be clearly expressed; at the undergraduate level students who perceive the assignment as a game will fail to recognize its value and scoff at the idea. Third, this should not be the first

oral activity in the class; it is somewhat threatening to describe oneself "au natural" when the audience and reader are unfamiliar with even the sound of each other's voices. Fourth, examples or illustrations from the instructor are a must; one can't expect to foster self-awareness in students, especially the older adult, if it cannot be evidenced in the instructor. The best way to illustrate this exercise in terms of rationale and stylistic structure (performance and written techniques) is to have the instructor provide a sensory description of himself or herself. Fifth, allow ample preparation time; three days are sufficient. Sixth, after the assignment is completed, encourage students to evaluate its effectiveness in stimulating self-awareness and literary sensitivity. A videotape of the exercise enhances this phase of the assignment.

Results

Although few student descriptions will bear the earmarks of the heightened language of literature, they will provide surprisingly creative and thoroughly sensitive images. The self-induced verbal stimuli on the page evoke an aliveness of text and reader that is unmistakenly natural. As with any intrapersonal examination, the awareness of self is best recognized through one's interpersonal relationships; this exercise is no exception. The sense of other is apparent in the descriptions and in the choice of words used to convey meaningful images to the audience. Finally, the student

readily combines images or feelings. This process of synesthesia accounts for the complex appeal of images and the chain of perception required to translate the total effect of the language.

The results are illustrated in the following student self-descriptions of each sense:

> Visual. "My most striking characteristic would obviously have to be my exquisite physique. I'm not as tall as Charles Atlas, although there have been occasions when I have been mistaken for his younger brother."
>
> "The long brown locks that my mother always called my crowning glory can be arranged to make the wearer look anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five years old."
>
> "On first meeting strangers often feel they recognize me; I remind them of their sister-in-law in Cincinnati or the lady they once lived next door to in Atlanta. . . . I attribute this to possessing 'hair-colored hair, eye-colored eyes, and a people face.'"
>
> Auditory. "There must be something about my southern Ohio accent that drives them crazy. Or it could be that tinge of sensuous nasality they can't resist."

"The voice I project is a cross between a bad cold and Ted Knight on the Mary Tyler Moore Show."

"I'm audible from quite a distance, wearing wood-bottom shoes."

Olfactory. "My scent is varied depending on the situation. After a hockey game I smell sweaty and moldy. When I finish work at the factory, my scent resembles burning rubber and a thousand different chemical odors. At school my scent is a garden variety of Mennen Speed Stick or perhaps Brut 33."

"I'm not aware of my own odor. It's not because I am constantly wearing perfume; I guess it's because there are always so many strong odors around me like food, cleaners, and other people wearing perfume."

"I smell exactly like sour milk. This odor is directly related to bottle-feeding my baby."

Gustatory. "My mouth often tastes of delightful tidbits, yet a passion for flavored lip gloss lends some variation. . . . . But it's a different story when I get up in the morning; I think they call it 'trenchmouth.'"

"Personally I've never tasted myself, but those who have

say that I have a delicate although somewhat salty flavor. Then again, no one has ever taken a really big bite."

"I would certainly taste like peanut butter. . . . My love of it is so great, I wouldn't be surprised if I was weaned on it."

Tactile. "My skin is soft and cool, as I am freezing regardless of the season. A touch will reveal a spot missed by the razor or a multitude of mosquite bites. But touching also serves as a form of communication much more personal than the spoken word. A touch will always bring a response from me, whether a smile or a hug."

"Touch is a ticklish question, and I should be the one to know. Understandably people have a difficult time keeping their hands off me. Maybe it's the freckles? Or maybe it's the soft but rugged texture of my skin? Whatever the reason, I'm game!"

"To the touch I feel either coarse like a light grain sandpaper or a little softer like a burlap bag. It usually depends on the season and the job I am doing at the moment."

Kinesthetic. "'Grace' has never been my middle name; but I can muster a little when I'm seated."

"My walk reveals my many moods--heavy strides when I'm angry; brisk steps when I'm late; and a sort of dazed shuffle stumbling into work at 6:45 a.m."

"I move much of the time like someone ice-skating; I have a tendency to drag my feet as I walk."

The significance of the descriptions is more apparent when performed by the original source; the oral presentation then becomes the basis for analysis and discussion of self-awareness and literary sensitivity. The assignment is merely the first step; it is important to realize that much confusion will occur if the descriptions are left to stand on their own. For instance, students need to be aware that their natural vocal and physical responsiveness to self-induced verbal stimuli can be achieved when responding to the language of literature. The process of recall and transference is much the same, though the student must take into consideration the degree to which he embodies the literature. Also, students will sometimes unconsciously combine imaginative and emotional experiences without recognizing this coalescence of images as the very essence of understanding self and imagery. Thus, the results of the exercise--aliveness of text and reader, self-awareness through awareness of others, and identification of the process of synesthesia--are the joint efforts of student and instructor.

Evaluation

Undergraduates find the sensory self-description a challenging, valuable, and enjoyable exercise. Beginning with the notion of challenging, students often comment that "baring one's soul" is no easy task. They are forced to examine those characteristics about themselves they often take for granted. Likewise, it is challenging to state in the written form that which is just as challenging to express in the spoken form.

The value of the exercise is twofold. First, the student benefits from the direct application of sensory receptivity to the written word. The "tensive relationship" between text and reader is natural and self-induced. This direct sensation makes the indirect sensation of literary language much more comprehendable. Students not only express self-awareness through verbal and nonverbal communication, but they discover these same symbols stimulate the audience as well; in fact, several undergraduates have admitted that their language and style were strategies used to involve the audience in the description. This awareness of audience is vital to the performance of oral interpretation. The second value of the exercise is its demonstration of the vocal and physical capabilities of the reader. There is probably no other assignment with which the student will be more familiar or more natural; consequently, students will project clear indications of just how flexible they can be. While no instructor likes to think a reader is incapable of vocal

variation or some bodily response, there are students who will find it difficult to increase their volume because they are soft-spoken by nature. Here is where the exercise paves the way for further exploration of self and the role of imagery.

The bonus feature is that students find the exercise an enjoyable starting point. Class members are introduced to each other and to oral interpretation in a unique and nonthreatening manner. More importantly, there is a sharing of self that promotes learning and provides a dynamic interaction of reader, text, and audience.

Conclusion

The sensory self-description is one of many means available to stimulate self-awareness and literary sensitivity. It can be used alone or in conjunction with other methods. However, the strength of this instructional strategy is its starting point--an imagery description of the self in words and actions that emanate from the self. Once the student experiences embodiment of self and embodiment of self-induced verbal stimuli, he then has a more concrete idea of how to actualize imagery in the performance of literature.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The types of imagery vary from author to author of college textbooks. This author uses kinesthetic imagery to include kinetic actions as well. Tactile imagery includes the sensation of physical pressure as well as the feeling of heat and cold.

[2]Keith Brooks, Eugene Bahn, and L. LaMont Okey, The Communicative Act of Oral Interpretation, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975), p. 65.

[3]Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), pp. 156-66.

[4]William Wordsworth, Daffodils.

[5]Chester C. Long, The Liberal Art of Interpretation (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), p. 42.

[6]William Schutz, Here Comes Everybody (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), p. 1.